

THE AUTHORSHIP OF *PIERS THE PLOW*

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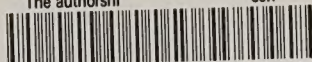
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DISCUSSIONS.

THE AUTHORSHIP OF 'PIERS THE PLOWMAN.'

ALL students of *Piers the Plowman*, however diverse may be their opinions on the questions treated in Mr Chambers's article in the January number of the *Review*, must, I think, be of one mind in cordially welcoming into their field an investigator of such admirable knowledge, sagacity, and fairness. I had resolved to write no more on the subject for the present, feeling that little substantial progress can be made until the text has been settled by scientific criticism; but as I am one of those whose conclusions have been so powerfully assailed by Mr Chambers, it seems to be incumbent on me to say how far I am prepared to acknowledge the force of his objections, and how far and for what reasons I remain at present of the same opinion as before.

In the first place, I must frankly admit that I was mistaken in asserting that the offences of Robert the Robber have no affinity with the sin of Sloth. It is now clear to me, thanks to Mr Chambers's excellent demonstration, that a mediaeval writer might, without any inappropriateness, have introduced the lament of the Robber as a sequel to the confession of Sloth. Although, as Mr Chambers acknowledges, Robert's offences in themselves come under the head of Covetousness, they are the result of habits of idleness, and it is his neglect to learn an honest trade that renders it impossible for him to make compensation to those whom he has injured. He does not actually fall into 'wanhope,' which is the recognised last and fatal stage in the progress of the slothful, but he is saved from it only by the recollection of the penitent thief, the standard example for the encouragement of those who are on the verge of despair. At the same time, it is worth remembering that in the B-text it is Covetousness, not Sloth, who 'wex into wanhope,' and would have hanged himself if he had not been 'reconforted' by Repentance. It is plain that Robert is meant to represent another and more desperate variety of the same deadly sin which the preceding penitent has confessed; but his character and utterances do not supply any clear grounds for deciding whether that sin was Covetousness or Sloth.

We may, however, find an answer to this question in the preceding lines (A v, 236—241). I fully grant that some kind of promise of restitution might fitly enough conclude the confession of Sloth. But

the promise that appears in these lines is not so worded as to favour the view that it was written for that purpose. Mr Chambers rightly insists that the proper meaning of 'win' is to gain by one's labour—to 'earn,' as Prof. Skeat renders it. For this very reason, the words 'al that I wikkedliche won' would more suitably relate to the results of the mercantile dishonesty to which Covetousness has pleaded guilty, than to those of such transgressions as in the B-text are laid to the charge of Sloth. The added words 'seththe I wit hade' point to a life spent in the deliberate pursuit of gain. It seems to me that 'wicked winning' is properly characteristic of Covetousness in the special form in which it manifests itself in the fraudulent tradesman, the usurer, or one who uses unjustly the opportunities for gain afforded by some regular calling. Although the 'Robert's man' is guilty of Covetousness as well as of Sloth, he belongs not to the tribe of Wynnere, but to that of Wastour.

I think, therefore, that while the lamentation of Robert, taken by itself, might, with equal appropriateness be placed as a pendant to the description of Covetousness or to that of Sloth, the entire passage A v, 236—259 would be improved in fitness if it were transferred to the former position. This was, as is well known, the opinion of C, who is at any rate a good witness with regard to the ideas of the fourteenth century, even if he be not, as some able scholars still believe, the original author himself. But the question is not whether C and certain modern people are right in thinking that a transposition would improve the poem, but whether it is likely that the present arrangement of the text is original. Are the reasons for the negative answer sufficiently weighty to justify us in setting aside the presumption that is rightly held to exist in favour of a traditional text against a mere conjecture? I think they are.

On the assumption that ll. 236—259 were intended to follow l. 235, we are met by a remarkable series of coincidences, which have to be regarded as purely accidental. First, these lines admittedly come in very awkwardly in their supposed original context; and we are to believe that it is by mere chance that when joined to line 145 the passage yields a continuous and satisfactory sense. Secondly, while we might feel only a mild surprise on observing that the poet had omitted to bring the confession of Covetousness to its needful conclusion in a promise of restitution, it is very odd that the deficiency should happen to be just the one which the transposition supplies. Thirdly, the promise made by Sloth happens to be expressed in language which, as I have shown, is unbecoming the character; and it so happens that if Covetousness and not Sloth were the speaker, this language would become perfectly accurate. I am unable to believe that these coincidences are accidental.

But I must not forget that one of the facts assumed in the preceding paragraph has been disputed. It has been said, and by scholars whose opinion I respect, that my proposed transposition does *not* result in a satisfactory sequence; that, in fact, the lines which I would transfer to the confession of Covetousness are inconsistent with those which they

are made to follow. Unfortunately I have failed to discover what my critics mean. Even assuming that the lines 241—2 are genuine, I can perceive no inconsistency. There is some awkwardness, no doubt, in making the penitent swear by the rood of Chester when he has just mentioned the rood of Bromholm. But this does not strike me as a serious difficulty, and it was assuredly not in order to evade it that I suggested that the two lines might be spurious. I think there are very good grounds for suspecting them. Let us consider the facts. The lines in question are as follows:

And with the residue and the remenaunt · bi the rode of Chester!
I schal seche seynt Treuthe · er I seo [*or seche*] Rome.

In A vii, 93—4 *Piers the Plowman* says:

And with the residue and the remenaunt · bi the rode of Chestre!
I wol worschupe therwith · Treuthe in my lyue.

Now surely this repetition is more than a little surprising. Mr Chambers suggests that it may have been designed to call attention to the contrast of character between the speakers in the two passages. This is more ingenious than satisfactory. My point is that while the words are perfectly appropriate where they occur in *Passus VII*—for the thrifty *Piers* knows that there is a 'residue' at his disposal when his debts are paid—they are quite unsuitable to the penitent (whether his name be Sloth or Covetousness) who in line 236 has just expressed uncertainty whether he will have enough even to compensate those whom he has wronged. If Mr Chambers's conjecture as to the motive of the repetition were intrinsically likely, one might suppose that the poet had inserted the two lines in their earlier unfitting place by an afterthought. But, as is well known, it is a common trick of mediaeval scribes to interpolate matter taken from a different part of the poem which they are copying.

It might perhaps be contended that the poet may originally have written the lines 236—259 at the end of the confession of Covetousness, and afterwards, seeing that some parts of the passage would serve to supplement his scanty description of Sloth, have hastily removed them to their present place, without troubling himself to remedy the inconveniences resulting from the transposition. To those who are convinced that the three recensions of the poem come from one hand, this supposition might prove attractive; it would be exactly in accordance with their view of the author's methods of composition. It will be time to discuss the merits of this solution when some one has seriously advocated it. The hypothesis of a scribal accident is at any rate simpler.

Although I still consider that the evidence for a dislocation of the text is conclusive, I must admit that Mr Chambers has done something to diminish the value of this result as an argument against the unity of authorship of the three forms of the poem. M. Jusserand found it possible to accept the hypothesis of transposition, and yet to maintain

that A, B, and C were the same person. This position will be more easily tenable now that it has been shown that the present arrangement of the text is one that the author might have been content to tolerate if he found it in the copy that lay before him when he came to revise his work. After fifteen years, a writer may well fail to remember so distinctly all the details of his plan as at once to detect any plausible alteration of it. The theory of unity of authorship does not necessarily imply, as some of its advocates suppose, that the elaboration of his early poem was the main preoccupation of William's life during thirty years. It may even be regarded as an argument on the conservative side that the second revision does attempt to remedy some of the faults caused by the dislocation, and that the final revision returns to the original order.

I now come to speak of the omission of the confession of Wrath. Mr Chambers maintains that if we consider the true design of the author, we shall see that this omission may well have been deliberate. He thinks that the comparative fulness or slightheadness of the treatment of the several sins is proportioned to the relative importance which the poet assigned to them as causes of the evils of his time. This explanation might serve to account for the little space given to Pride and Lechery as compared with Covetousness¹. But the very meagre handling of Sloth, in contrast with the exuberance of imaginative detail in the description of Gluttony, does not seem equally favourable to Mr Chambers's view. I suspect that the poet troubled himself very little about the proportions of his work, but expatiated freely on those subjects that happened to stimulate his imagination, and dealt more or less perfunctorily with the rest. A careful re-examination of the *Passus*, in the light of Mr Chambers's remarks, has convinced me that whatever his design may have been, it was intended to be accomplished by showing all the seven sins in order brought to contrition by the preaching of Conscience. Accordingly, when I find that in the existing text Envy shows no penitence, while Wrath does not appear at all, and that both these defects are accounted for by the supposition either of a 'lost leaf,' or of the 'over-hipping' of a leaf by a scribe, I feel constrained to conclude that one of these suppositions is right. As I do not accept Prof. Manly's theory of a lost counterfoil after line 235, I see no reason for preferring either of them to the other.

We have now to consider in what way this result should influence our judgment on the question of the authorship of the B-revision. If the reviser had failed to perceive that the confession of Envy was incomplete, and that that of Wrath was missing, it would be hard indeed to resist the conclusion that he could not be the original author. That he has attempted to supply both gaps is, so far, a point in favour of his identity with the writer of A. On the other hand, although (as the passage about Gluttony shows) the A-poet was not incapable of being led astray from strict artistic propriety when he saw a chance of

¹ Perhaps this is too much to concede. The destructive storm, in the poet's opinion, 'Was aperteliche for pruide' and for no poynt elles.'

exercising his gift of humorous description, there is nothing in his work that would lead one to expect from him the curious irrelevance of B's confession of Wrath. I do not forget that a man's mental character may undergo a good deal of change in the course of fifteen years; but I find great difficulty in conceiving that this passage can have been written by the original author. A point not to be overlooked is that the omissions and alterations of the C-text considerably lessen the inappropriateness of the confession.

I have now dealt, to the best of my ability, with all those parts of Mr Chambers's paper which are directed against my own published views. It is not necessary or desirable that I should comment on those of his arguments to which a reply may be expected from Prof. Manly, though on several points I find myself not precisely agreeing with either side. On the general question of the authorship of *Piers the Plowman* I have throughout endeavoured to guard myself against making up my mind too definitely. In spite of certain difficulties, I think that the balance of probability is in favour of a plurality of authors; but this is only a provisional conclusion, and I prefer to abstain from controversy until textual criticism has provided a secure basis for argument.

I should like, however, to call attention to one piece of external evidence, the import of which does not seem to have been correctly apprehended; the testimony, namely, of John But. It is perfectly possible that this testimony is worthless: John But may have been merely guessing in the dark. But it is also possible that he knew what he was talking about; and so long as there is no proof of the contrary, it seems worth while to ascertain precisely what his testimony amounts to. Now, in the first place, I think the natural inference from his statement is that his lines were appended to a MS. containing only the poem of 'Do-wel': that is to say A ix—xii. He indicates that this poem was the last of the three works written by 'Will,' the others being 'Piers the Plowman' and 'The Field of Folk' (*mechel puple*). When he had finished 'that which is here written,' Will died. If John But was correctly informed, the poems contained in the A-text, though they are obviously intended to form a continuous whole, must have been published in three instalments, comprising respectively Passus i—v, vi—viii, and ix—xii. As to the date at which John But wrote there is no certain evidence, except that it was before the deposition of Richard II. The prayer for those who love the king does not prove that the quarrel between the king and his nobles had already begun; but, on the other hand, the prayer might have been uttered by a writer of the Piers Plowman school (even if his opinions were identical with those of the author of *Mum, Sothsegger*) at any time before 1399. But if I am right in supposing that John But wrote when Will's three works still circulated separately, it will be more likely that he is to be placed near the beginning of the reign. It seems clear that he either did not know of the existence of the B and C texts, or regarded them as spurious.

Now, as I have said, the testimony of John But may quite possibly

be worthless; but it is the earliest piece of external evidence that we possess, and it will be well not to reject it without consideration. Of course, if internal evidence clearly demonstrates that A ix—xii cannot have been written by the author of A i—viii, there is an end of the matter; and I think it would be hardly reasonable to accept John But's authority in disproof of Will's authorship of B and C, while rejecting it where it confirms the traditional view. Prof. Manly's arguments for separate authorship of A ix—xii are not yet before the world; they may turn out to be irresistible. But from the mere inferiority of the later poem to its predecessor one can infer nothing. It has happened again and again that a writer has poured out his soul in a work of imagination, worthily embodying the fruit of years of meditation; and afterwards, when the original inspiration was exhausted, has endeavoured ineffectually to follow up his first great success. In A i—viii we have a great though not faultless work of art, with a clear design developed consistently from the germ that was in the writer's mind when he began. We feel that it reaches its predestined conclusion, and that any continuation would be a disfigurement. So, probably, William himself may have felt; and yet it would not be very strange if, after a while, the effect produced by his vision, and the consciousness of obscure thoughts within his own mind, prompted him to take up his pen again, to tell the story of a quest for the meaning of Do-wel, Do-bet, and Do-best, without the long preparation that had gone to the making of his one great work. The author of the poem of Do-wel has obviously no foreseen design; he gropes uncertainly after a solution which never comes in sight; but I do not see in this any reason why he may not be the same man who worked out with such admirable sureness the noble conception of the Vision.

I wish, before concluding this paper, to put in print for the first time a suggestion which has long been present to my mind, and which has been variously received by the scholars to whom I have communicated it privately. This suggestion is that the choice of the name Piers (the popular form of Peter) may have been prompted by the ejaculation 'Peter!' with which the Plowman first enters on the scene. It would of course be impossible to prove that this conjecture is correct, but it seems to me highly probable. If it could be established, it would involve the important consequence that William was indeed the creator of the ideal figure which for centuries influenced so powerfully the thought and life of England, and that he did not, as has often been supposed, merely introduce into literature a name and a conception that were already current among the people when he began to write.

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